

## **Tips for Book Discussions**

**from Washington Center for the Book at Seattle Public Library**

### **Reading Critically**

Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. These books usually present the author's view of an important truth and not infrequently send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion—whether you are the leader or simply a participant—differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, “Is this significant?” or “Why does the author include this?” Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don't know the answer yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, “what if ... “ questions.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author's style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your experience: They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself into the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

### **The Discussion**

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "It just didn't appeal to me" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing, and world view. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the murderer and victim. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences ... if that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that it's not a book discussion.

## **About the Author**

**(from Winnetka-Northfield Public Library, IL, “One Book, Two Villages” resource guide)**

Sara Gruen grew up in Canada and moved to the United States in 1999 for a technical writing job. After she was laid off she fulfilled her lifelong dream of writing fiction. Her first novel, “Riding Lessons” (2004) was a bestseller, and she began writing “Water for Elephants.” Her publisher at that time was not interested in this novel so instead she wrote a sequel to her original novel, Flying Changes. She then returned to work on “Water for Elephants” and to avoid distractions did much of the writing in seclusion in a walk-in closet. She is currently at work on a new novel, “Ape House,” which features bonobos. She lives in an environmental community north of Chicago with her husband, three children, and a menagerie including a horse, goats, dogs, and cats.

**(from Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2005)**

Sara Gruen’s debut novel, “Riding Lessons,” concerns an Olympic-level rider named Annemarie Zimmer, who loses her prized horse and her promising career in a terrible accident. The incident proves to be the first link in a chain of events that culminates two decades later. At that point, Annemarie has lost her job, is in the midst of a divorce from her husband, and has discovered that her father is terminally ill. Taking her highly rebellious teenaged daughter with her, she returns to her parents’ riding school in New Hampshire to regroup. There, she encounters a former love interest, Dan Garibaldi. She also finds a neglected horse with rare, brindled coloring; it is the same coat pattern as Highland Harry, her mount who died in the accident twenty years before. The coloration is so unusual that Annemarie feels there must be a connection between the two animals, and she becomes determined to discover what it is. Eventually, she learns that the horse is Harry’s brother.

“Riding Lessons’ is an exciting character study that uses the equestrian world as a backdrop to a family drama,” mused Harriet Klausner in a review for AllReaders.com. The reviewer praised the “vivid story line” and the author’s “insight into the heroine who remains the center of a powerful tale of redemption.” Jill M. Smith, a contributor to RomanticTimes.com, advised that “painful estranged relationships form the core of this emotionally complex and dark novel.” A contributor to Publishers Weekly wrote that “Riding Lessons” is “beautifully nuanced,” and added: “The book’s appealing horse scenes depicted with unsentimental affection help build a moving story of loss, survival and renewal.” Finally, a Booklist writer praised Gruen’s writing skill, calling “Riding Lessons” “so exquisitely written it’s hard to believe that it’s also a debut.”

**Official web site:** [www.saragruen.com](http://www.saragruen.com)

**Farrah Field Interviews Sara Gruen, author of “Water for Elephants”**  
(from [smallspiralnotebook.com](http://smallspiralnotebook.com))

**Farrah Field:** At the end of your latest novel, “Water for Elephants,” you reveal the inspiration behind the book: two books of photography entitled “The Photographs of Edward J. Kelty” and “Wild, Weird, and Wonderful: The American Circus as Seen by F.W. Glasier.” Can you describe how the photographs inspired you to pursue a novel featuring the circus setting? In other words, did specific photographs of people and animals help to create those characters?

**Sara Gruen:** I was a day away from starting another novel when I opened the Sunday paper and saw a stunning panoramic photo of a circus’s freak show in the 1920s or 30s. That photograph inspired me to buy the other two books of photographs, and really set me on course to write this novel. However, I chose the photographs that appear in my book after I wrote it because I wanted them to have specific relevance to the surrounding chapters.

**FF:** You also say that you spent time with circus trainers to learn more about elephants and elephant body language. Would you please tell more about these experiences?

**SG:** It was actually a former elephant handler for the Kansas City Zoo, who happens to be married to a friend of mine. He was gored by one of his charges, a male African elephant named Casey, and took a tusk through the thigh, the ribcage, and upper arm. He was very lucky to survive. Even though this was twenty years before our visit, one of the female elephants at the zoo remembered him and when he called out to her she came as close as she could to the edge of the enclosure and purred. I had no idea elephants purred, and it was really wild—it sounded like an industrial vacuum with stuff clinking around in it, and obviously I had to work it into the book.

**FF:** While we’re on the topic of research, how true-to-life is your depiction of how circuses used to be managed? Do you feel circuses are still entrenched in the mistreatment of people and animals?

**SG:** I have no idea how current day circuses operate, but circuses in the 1920s and 1930s ran the spectrum from what were called “grift shows” to the “Sunday school shows.” The grift shows were the ones that made a fine art out of shortchanging their customers, sent pickpockets into the crowd, and had cooch tents in the back. (The Benzini Brothers falls squarely in the grift show camp.) The Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows, on the other hand, was such a Sunday School outfit that they wouldn’t even tolerate the suggestion of impropriety. If two unattached employees were caught dating, the man was fired.

**FF:** What did your research reveal about the circus hierarchy, the class division among the laborers and the performers?

**SG:** It was a starkly defined hierarchy that permeated all aspects of circus life. At the top were the “bosses” and performers, and at the bottom were the working men (canvas men, roustabouts, etc.). The lowliest performer ranked above the highest working man. The cookhouse, where everyone ate, was separated down the middle by a curtain and the bosses and performers sat on one side at tables with linen and flowers, and the working men sat at bare wooden tables set end to end on the other.

**FF:** As I read your novel, I couldn't help thinking about "Geek Love" by Katherine Dunn. If literature about circuses were its own genre, what books would you include?

**SG:** I don't think I know of any others! If we included Vaudeville (mostly just because I loved this novel and want to mention it), "Niagara Falls All Over Again" by Elizabeth McCracken.

**FF:** As Jacob, the orphaned main character of the novel, recounts his grueling experience working as the veterinarian of a traveling circus, his memories are starkly juxtaposed with his present condition as a feeble, very old man in a retirement home. What led you to structure the novel this way? What drew you to the contrast of the backbreaking circus lifestyle with the diminished perspective of an elder Jacob?

**SG:** I never write from an outline, so when I sat down to begin writing, I was a little surprised to find an old man in my head. I think part of it was that I didn't want to leave Jacob before the beginning of WWII because I would always wonder what had happened to him, and part of it was that I needed to know what became of Rosie. Also, there were obvious parallels between the younger Jacob's caged charges and the older Jacob's lack of control over his existence. In the nursing home, he gets fed and set out on display regularly, just as his former charges did.

**FF:** The novel opens with a horrific murder scene that takes place in the middle of the arc of the narrative. Why did you choose this particular part of the story with which to open?

**SG:** It's the hook factor. I wanted something to make people want to keep reading. My greatest fear is of boring people, so I tend to start my books with the equivalent of a flaming car wreck.

**FF:** Jacob's virginity is an excellent contrast to the seediness of circus work. How important was it to the development of his character to maintain his virginity and thus lose it in the way in which he does?

**SG:** Ah, but does he? The morning after his night of debauchery, he's not at all clear on that. The first sexual experience that he does remember is a joyful, wonderful moment, and I wanted to contrast those two experiences because he's so naïve when he initially finds himself on the circus that he spins out of control. By the time of his second experience, his true nature has regained control.

**FF:** A reviewer from Booklist describes the ending of "Water for Elephants" as, "a little too cheerful to be believed." What is your reaction to this interpretation?

**SG:** I prefer to come away from a book feeling good, not depressed, and the only other conceivable ending was depressing in the extreme.

**FF:** The animals in all of your books hold as much import as the people. Rosie, the lemonade-stealing elephant, could be considered as much of a main character as Jacob or Marlina, his love interest. How do you develop animals into characters?

**SG:** I would argue that Rosie is very much a main character. In fact, she's my favorite character. I develop animals into characters in the exact same way that I develop people into characters, because they're as individual as people. With Rosie, I read up on elephants, talked with an elephant handler, and most importantly, observed elephants just being elephants with each other. After that, it was easy. Perhaps strangely, the characters that came most easily to me were Old Jacob, Rosie, and Queenie the dog.

**FF:** Furthermore, all of your books have close relationship with animals. Do you foresee yourself writing without them? If not, what other parts of the animal world would you like to explore in your writing?

**SG:** I think I fall slightly outside the normal range on the animal-loving scale, but I didn't realize it until it started coming up in interviews. I've just always been an animal person—I surround myself with them, and I seek them out. When we're on vacation and away from our own animal crew, I need regular animal fixes—when we go to Bonaire, I buy bags of apples and carrots and my husband and I drive around in search of wild donkeys. When we're in Key West each year for the Literary Seminar, we make a pilgrimage to Hemingway House, buy a couple of bottles of catnip from their gift shop, and get all of Papa's cats' descendents hammered. When we leave, they're lolling about on the lawn drunk as skunks getting their tummies scratched.

**FF:** On your website, you make it abundantly clear that proceeds from your books benefit animal charities. What prompted this action?

**SG:** All of my books contain themes of animals in distress, and these reflect real life. There are so many animals in need—homeless, abandoned, abused (my own home is filled with rescued animals). There was never any question that I would donate when and where I could. In fact, my first major purchase since learning that “Water for Elephants” is doing so well was a sizeable donation to The Elephant Sanctuary in Hohenwald, Tennessee.

**FF:** You say that you live in an environmental community. What constitutes an environmental community and what effort does your family make to preserve and protect the environment?

**SG:** Our community has four-hundred-and-some families living on around 680 acres of land, right at the crossing of two commuter railroads so that it's easy to get to downtown Chicago without setting foot in a car. Each of our lots is small, so we have lots of open space and we share an organic farm. Our homes are approximately 60% more energy-efficient than similar ones in the area, and we're active in restoring the prairie and wetlands to which we're adjacent. Our charter school emphasizes environmental stewardship. It is part of the curriculum, but we also live it on a daily basis by doing things like sending trash-free lunches—which is challenging for someone like me, whose plastic containers never seem to have lids that fit!

**Other Titles by Sara Gruen**

Riding Lessons (Doubleday, 2004)

Flying Changes (HarperTorch 2005)

Water for Elephants (Algonquin, 2006)

Ape House (Spiegel & Grau, expected release 2008)

**Reviews of “Water for Elephants”  
(from Bowker’s Books in Print)**

Voice of Youth Advocates, October 1, 2006

Quill & Quire, July 1, 2006

Booklist, April 15, 2006

Library Journal, March 15, 2006

Publishers Weekly, March 6, 2006

Pomerantz, Sharon. Chicago Tribune, June 4, 2006

Wilkins, Charles. Globe & Mail, June 3, 2006

Blais, Jacqueline. USA Today, June 1, 2006

Judd, Elizabeth. New York Times Book Review, April 6, 2006

## **Reading Group Guide**

**From a reading group guide on [www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com)  
Courtesy of Algonquin Books**

### **About the Book**

Though he may not speak of them, the memories still dwell inside Jacob Jankowski's ninety-something-year-old mind. Memories of himself as a young man, tossed by fate onto a rickety train that was home to the Benzini Brothers Most Spectacular Show on Earth. Memories of a world filled with freaks and clowns, with wonder and pain and anger and passion; a world with its own narrow, irrational rules, its own way of life, and its own way of death. The world of the circus: to Jacob it was both salvation and a living hell.

Jacob was there because his luck had run out - orphaned and penniless, he had no direction until he landed on this locomotive "ship of fools." It was the early part of the Great Depression, and everyone in this third-rate circus was lucky to have any job at all. Marlena, the star of the equestrian act, was there because she fell in love with the wrong man, a handsome circus boss with a wide mean streak. And Rosie the elephant was there because she was the great gray hope, the new act that was going to be the salvation of the circus; the only problem was, Rosie didn't have an act - in fact, she couldn't even follow instructions. The bond that grew among this unlikely trio was one of love and trust, and ultimately, it was their only hope for survival.

Surprising, poignant and funny, "Water for Elephants" is that rare novel with a story so engrossing, one is reluctant to put it down; with characters so engaging, they continue to live long after the last page has been turned; with a world built of wonder, a world so real, one starts to breathe its air.

### Discussion Questions

**From Algonquin Books. Prepared by Hal Hager, of Hal Hager & Associates, Somerville, New Jersey.**

1. To what extent do the chapters concerning the elderly Jacob enhance the chapters recounting the young Jacob's experiences with the Benzini Brothers circus? In what ways do the chapters about the young Jacob contribute to a deeper understanding of the elderly Jacob's life?
2. How does the novel's epigraph, the quote from Dr. Seuss's "Horton Hatches the Egg," apply to the novel? What are the roles and importance of faithfulness and loyalty in "Water for Elephants"? In what ways does Gruen contrast the antagonisms and cruelties of circus life with the equally impressive loyalties and instances of caring?
3. Who did you, upon reading the prologue, think murdered August? What effect did that opening scene of chaos and murder have on your reception of the story that follows?

4. In connection with Jacob's formal dinner with August and Marlana in their stateroom, Jacob remarks, "August is gracious, charming, and mischievous" (page 93). To what extent is this an adequate characterization of August? How would you expand upon Jacob's observation? How would you characterize August? Which situations in the novel reveal his true character?

5. August says of Marlana, "Not everyone can work with liberty horses. It's a God-given talent, a sixth sense, if you will" (page 94). Both August and Jacob recognize Marlana's skills, her "sixth sense," in working with the horses. In what ways does that sixth sense attract each man? How do August and Jacob differ in terms of the importance each places on Marlana's abilities?

6. After Jacob puts Silver Star down, August talks with him about the reality of the circus. "The whole thing's illusion, Jacob," he says, "and there's nothing wrong with that. It's what people want from us. It's what they expect" (page 104). How does Gruen contrast the worlds of reality and illusion in the novel? Is there anything wrong with pandering to people's need for illusion? Why do we crave the illusions that the circus represents?

7. Reflecting on the fact that his platitudes and stories don't hold his children's interest, the elderly Jacob notes, "My real stories are all out of date. So what if I can speak firsthand about the Spanish flu, the advent of the automobile, world wars, cold wars, guerrilla wars, and Sputnik - that's all ancient history now. But what else do I have to offer?" (page 110). How might we learn to appreciate the stories and life lessons of our elders and encourage people younger than ourselves to appreciate our own?

8. Looking at himself in the mirror, the old Jacob tries "to see beyond the sagging flesh." But he claims, "It's no good. . . . I can't find myself anymore. When did I stop being me?" (page 111). How would you answer that question for Jacob or any individual, or for yourself?

9. In what ways and to what degree do Uncle Al's maneuvers and practices regarding the defunct Fox Brothers circus reflect traditional American business practices? How would you compare his behavior with that of major businessmen and financiers of today? What alternative actions would you prefer?

10. As he lies on his bedroll, after his night with Barbara and Nell, Jacob cannot empty his mind of troubling visions and he reflects that "the more distressing the memory, the more persistent its presence" (page 143). How might the elderly Jacob's memories corroborate or contradict this observation? What have been your experiences and observations in this regard?

11. In his "Carnival of the Animals," Ogden Nash wrote, "Elephants are useful friends." In what ways is Rosie a "useful" friend? What is Rosie's role in the events that follow her acquisition by Uncle Al?

12. After Jacob successfully coaches August in Polish commands for Rosie, he observes, “It’s only when I catch Rosie actually purring under August’s loving ministrations that my conviction starts to crumble. And what I’m left looking at in its place is a terrible thing” (page 229). What is Jacob left “looking at,” how does it pertain to August’s personality and Jacob’s relationship with August, and what makes it a “terrible thing”?

13. How did you react to the redlighting of Walter and Camel, and eight others, off the trestle? How might we see Uncle Al’s cutthroat behavior as “an indictment of a lifetime spent feigning emotions to make a buck” (in the words of one reviewer)?

14. After the collapse of the Benzini Brothers circus and Uncle Al’s having “done a runner” (page 314), Jacob realizes, “Not only am I unemployed and homeless, but I also have a pregnant woman, bereaved dog, elephant, and eleven horses to take care of” (page 317). What expectations did you entertain for Jacob and Marlena’s (and their menagerie’s) future after they leave the Benzini Brothers circus? How do the elderly Jacob’s memories of Marlena and their life together confirm or alter those expectations?

15. At the end of the novel, Jacob exclaims, “So what if I’m ninety-three? . . . why the hell shouldn’t I run away with the circus?” (page 331). What would you project to be the elderly Jacob’s experiences after he runs away with the circus the second time? How does his decision reflect what we have learned about his early years?

16. Sara Gruen has said that the “backbone” of her novel “parallels the biblical story of Jacob,” in the book of Genesis. On the first night after his leaving Cornell, for example, Jacob - as did his biblical namesake - lies “back on the bank, resting my head on a flat stone” (page 23). In what other ways does “Water for Elephants” parallel the story of the biblical Jacob? How do the names of many of the characters reflect names of characters in the biblical account?

17. In the words of one reviewer, “Water for Elephants” “explores . . . the pathetic grandeur of the Depression-era circus.” In what ways and to what extent do the words “pathetic grandeur” describe the world that Gruen creates in her novel?

## **Further Reading**

**From NovelList/EBSCO Publishing © 2001**

*(Get to NovelList from the library's web site: <http://www.dbrl.org/reference/databases.html>)*

### **“The Circus in Winter” by Cathy Day**

A unique novel charts the long relationship between the Great Porter Circus and a small town in Indiana, where circus folk and small-town inhabitants mingle in a series of long-term relationships that cross into both worlds.

### **“The Final Confession of Mabel Stark” by Robert Hough**

A fictionalized autobiography tells about the life, loves and adventures of Mabel Stark, the greatest female tiger trainer in circus history.

### **“Oh My Stars” by Lorna Landvik**

In a novel set during the early days of rock 'n' roll, Violet Mathers, a down-and-out woman, becomes embroiled with a handsome musical pioneer.

### **“Pretty Boy” by Bill Brooks**

Rising from the harvests and oil fields of the Oklahoma dustbowl, Pretty Boy Floyd, sporting unusually good luck, fashionable tastes, and a penchant for attracting beautiful women, begins a bank robbing spree between Kansas City and Ohio.

### **“Confessions of Max Tivoli” by Andrew Sean Greer**

Born as an old man, Max Tivoli lives his life aging backwards, falling in love and living an odd, sometimes terrifying life in San Francisco at the turn of the nineteenth century.

### **“Blue Moon Circus” by Michael Raleigh**

Together with a magician, a snake handler, a Russian animal tamer, and a nine-year-old orphan, ringmaster Lewis Tully tours the American West in 1926 with his circus act for one last time before settling down.